
According to Luke, the very last thing Jesus did before he ascended into heaven was to send his people - that's us - out on mission

Acts 1.1–8 NIV ...Jesus gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised... in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and to the ends of the earth

This is what the church is all about, in the final analysis

The church is the gathering of those who love Jesus... of those who have encountered his love, and now are compelled by his love for them to trust him, to follow him, and through their lives, their words, their choices... bear witness to all the world of God's great love

God has done something absolutely amazing, in Jesus

John 3.16–17 NIV For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

All of the sin of the world was gathered up into Jesus on that cross, and in his death, the power of sin and evil has been defeated

And the church is the gathering of those who are blown away by God's love, blown away by Jesus

And as we taste the wonder of God's love for us, we cannot simply continue on in our old way of life, living for ourselves, and our own ambitions... listen to Paul

2 Corinthians 5.14–15 NIV For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So that's what the church really is

We're a gathering of people who are blown away by God's love in Jesus, and therefore are witnesses... to Jesus

So... what does it look like to be a witness to Jesus?

Well, sometimes witness happens in dramatic fashion

Acts 3.1–3.10 NIV One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate ...to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him ... and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

This is an amazing story...

And there is much in it for us to reflect on - in particular, consider the simple confidence that Peter had that God would heal this lame man in the name of Jesus of Nazareth... this was so convicting for me

I remember one of my mentors in India many years ago saying that the early church had no silver and gold, but they healed the lame... whereas now we have all the silver and gold, but have forgotten to trust God for healing.... but that's a conversation for another day

Notice what happened to the man who was lame

Acts 3.8 NIV He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

That's the first way we bear witness to Jesus - in TRANSFORMATION

Perhaps you were crippled by guilt and shame and depression and insecurity... and then you encountered the love of God in Jesus... now you've tasted the life of the kingdom of God...

And you are filled with joy and gratitude... and everybody around you hears about it, sees it, and wonders about it

Acts 3.11–3.19 NIV While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them... When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.

"You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord..."

This, too, is what it means to be a witness to Jesus - in PROCLAMATION

Peter speaks boldly, and courageously, and clearly - without fear... He's very clear and direct... and urges everyone to repent, and turn back to God in Jesus, for the forgiveness of their sins

And then, of course, he instantly faces opposition, even persecution

Acts 4.1–4.4 NIV The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

And this, too, is what it means to bear witness, in PERSECUTION

Your witness, at times, might result in scorn, or disbelief, or mockery, persecution...

But because you are centered in the love of God in Jesus, you accept the persecution... and offer kindness and compassion in return

That, too, is an essential part of bearing witness - COMPASSION

You remember the words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount?

Matthew 5.38–45 NIV “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles...

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

Because you understand how Jesus defeated evil on that cross - by laying his life down in the face of evil...

You understand that evil cannot be overcome by more evil...

Nor can violence be overcome by more violence...

Hate cannot be overcome by more hate...

And so, because your heart has been captured by the love of Jesus

You trust him, and you begin to learn to love your enemies

You begin to learn to pray for those who persecute you...

And you're not praying that they be destroyed, or defeated - rather you're praying for goodness and grace to come upon them

You're praying that those who do you harm will themselves experience the love of God in Jesus

All of this is impossible without the Holy Spirit...

This is why Jesus said, You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses...

On Palm Sunday, two years ago, ISIS bombed two churches in Egypt

45 Christians were killed, and about 130 were injured

The next day, Monday, at the evening service at a church in Cairo, a Coptic priest named Father George spoke in response

[VIDEO] I'd like you to watch this clip from his message

God give us the grace to respond like that, in simple trust...

This is an astonishing, extreme example of witness to Jesus

But it all begins in a very simple place

When your heart is captivated by Jesus

And you discover in yourself a love for him, a simple trust in him

And you find time to be with him, to pursue him, to immerse yourself in his Word, the Bible... to talk to him, to listen to him, to pour out your heart in prayer... and in that intimacy with him, faith deepens within you

You must immerse yourself in the Word of God - the Bible

Because without a deep and thoughtful and prayerful and obedient immersion in the Word, we will be utterly unprepared to handle the complex challenges our world throws at us

In early September, we're starting a 6-month immersion in the whole Bible - Tuesday nights from 6.30-8pm. If you're interested, please look up MIQRA on our website, or let us know...

So witness begins with our hearts being enchanted by Jesus

And now you're determined to follow Jesus, to understand his way as the Bible explains it, to obey him, to love as he loves

Sometimes we think that being a witness is all about knowing a lot... or being skilled in debate and argument, or having awesome people skills, or being a great communicator, or learning some particular technique or method or whatever...

On the contrary: genuine witness to Jesus always begins with your heart being amazed by his love for you

So witness reflects the Jesus way to the world around us...

And then witness explains the Jesus way to the world around us

2 Corinthians 5.14–20 NIV For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again...

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

We are living through one of the most divisive and hate-filled times that our country has gone through, at least in my own recollection

I'm not saying anything you don't already know

We are divided around race - white and black and every hue in between...

We are divided rich from poor... we are divided around everything we could possibly be divided by

I don't have the wisdom to either understand or sort out the incredible complexities that we face

But I do know two things, from the Word of God

First, this communal condition of division and hatred is precisely the evil that Jesus came to overcome...

The brokenness that he came to heal

The deep cause of all our troubles is that sin has shattered, destroyed and corrupted our relationships

Sin has shattered our relationship with God... instead of recognizing him as our Father, our Creator, our source of life, the true love of our hearts, the One without whom life makes no sense... we have come to see him as angry, and hateful, and distant, and harsh, and cruel, and untrustworthy, and ultimately, non-existent

Sin has destroyed our relationships with one another... instead of seeing one another as a gift of God, as a brother or sister created in the image of God through whom we can experience the goodness and the wisdom and the creativity and the love of God, we see each other as rivals, as competitors, as threats, as enemies, as those to be used, manipulated, deceived, discarded...

And then we act out this broken, sinful perspective, and thereby create a living hell around us

So first, the deep cause of the pain of the world around us is broken relationships - with God, and then with each other

And second, the gospel of Jesus is all about reconciliation

Of what God has done in Jesus to reconcile us to himself, and then reconcile us with one another

So when the world seems most divided, it is then that the gospel of Jesus can shine most clearly, if it is spoken and practiced by people who are so caught up in the love of Jesus that they are living examples of reconciliation in any and all circumstances

I want to say this to you as simply as I can: to be a witness for Jesus today in this divided, broken world is to be an agent of reconciliation - not an agent of division

In Jesus, God is reconciling all the world to himself

In Jesus, God is reconciling all of us to one another

And it is to this that our lives, our words, our witness, our choices, our politics, our budgets, our schedules... must all be focused

The Bridge

I'd like to talk with you about a very significant mission of witness and reconciliation that we as a church have been engaged with for the past 7 years

You know that there is a very large refugee community around Columbus

And a very large percentage of those who have sought refuge around us here are from Somalia - fleeing the unspeakable atrocities of civil war in their homeland

Now for the most part, they are not welcomed among us...

They are of a different faith... a different culture... a different language...

And they are often seen as a threat to our way of life

But there are many among us in this church

...who have taken on the mission of moving out into the refugee community with love, with service, with reconciling relationships in the name of Jesus... with the practical love of Jesus

At the Bridge, on the West side, we at Heritage have been serving the refugee community - in the name of Jesus, openly and unashamedly - for the past 6 years

Over time we've built deep trust within the Somali community, the Muslim community

Over time, we as a church are bearing witness to the reconciling love of God in Jesus - within a context that would normally be impossible to imagine

I'd like you to watch a clip that records the experience of one of our friends at the Bridge

[Khadija's VIDEO]

Interview

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Communion
